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ABSTRACT

In September 1992, a small group of experienced researchers met to identify areas of research and specific research hypotheses to guide further inquiry into transfer. Specifically, participants examined transfer as it relates to institutional mission, institutional organization, and access to education and identified various premises upon which hypotheses might be structured, including: (1) community colleges may reach a "tipping point" at which the balance of functional missions may be upset by an overconcentration on one or more components (career education, collegiate education, remediation, etc.) to the detriment of the remaining components; (2) institutional mission shifts over time, reflecting changes in the relative emphasis placed on various parts of the comprehensive community college curriculum; (3) student transfer from community colleges is a function of course content and expectations; (4) student participation in nontraditional educational experiences, such as military training or formal education provided by private industry, affects student interest in transfer; (5) through the organization and delivery of instruction, faculty influence student decisions to continue their education; (6) student retention at the community college and student attainment of the associate's degree may be related to student transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions; (7) tuition increases and enrollment caps will divert students from four-year institutions to community colleges, thus reinforcing the community college emphasis on collegiate education and increasing subsequent transfer rates; and (8) the quality of advising received by community college students is related to student transfer behavior. References and a list of participants are included. (MAB)

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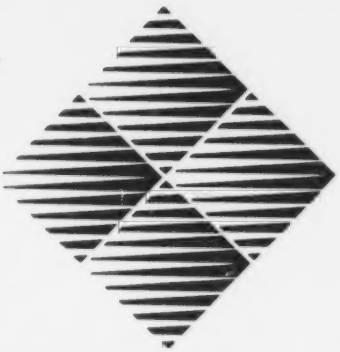

GUIDING FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER FUNCTION: SUMMARY OF A NATIONAL SEMINAR

by Meredith J. Ludwig and James C. Palmer

In September 1992, the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer of the American Council on Education convened a small group of experienced researchers who have devoted attention to the effectiveness of the community college transfer function. The purpose of the seminar was to identify areas of research and specific research hypotheses to guide further inquiry into transfer: its impact and implications for the relationship between two- and four-year institutions. What follows is a summary of the two-day meeting.

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Research on the community college transfer function falls into three general categories. Policy studies, often carried out by practitioners closely identified with the community college, delineate institutional and state attempts to enhance transfer through articulation agreements or student services programs. Examples include Dorothy Knoell's review of articulation and transfer practices over the past 25 years (Knoell, 1990) and the studies of state transfer policies conducted by Kintzer and Wattenbarger (1985) and by Bender (1990). Analytic studies, carried out largely by sociologists and economists who are not affiliated with the community college movement, assess the results of these efforts in terms of actual transfer outcomes. Examples include Breneman and Nelson (1981), Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel (1989), Kevin Dougherty (1991, 1992), Valerie Lee (1990, 1992) and Norton Grubb (1992). Finally, descriptive studies, conducted by educational researchers such as Cohen (1991), Adelman (1992), and Palmer and Pugh (1993), examine the demographics of students and their participation and achievement patterns, for example, by focusing on the magnitude of transfer in terms of transfer rates or the proportion of baccalaureate graduates who use a community college as a stepping stone to the bachelor's degree.

Given the body of research available, what further studies are needed to understand and improve student transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions? This question was addressed at a two-day seminar convened in September 1992 by the National Center for Academic Achievement and Transfer of the American Council on Education. The 19 seminar attendees were experienced researchers who have examined transfer issues, primarily from an analytic perspective. In considering future research needs, participants examined the relationship of transfer to three interrelated constructs:

- institutional mission, as reflected in the mix of course offerings in the comprehensive community college curriculum, in the allocation of budgetary resources among various community college functions (vocational education, collegiate education, etc.), and in the decisions of community college leaders and policy makers;

- institutional organization, as reflected in organizational structure and climate, in the advising and services received by community college students, and in the effectiveness of articulation links between two-year and four-year colleges; and

- access to education, as reflected in policies that affect the admission and subsequent educational attainment of students for whom initial attendance at a four-year college is unlikely.

In all, 11 premises (discussed below) on which future transfer research may be focused were identified. As the participants pointed out, some of these premises are more easily investigated by researchers than others. Together they are offered as a tentative foundation for the formulation of more precise hypotheses concerning the requisites of effective transfer policies and practices.

Mission and Transfer

When considering the community college, the participants noted the inconsistent picture of institutional mission that emerges in state policy statements, college catalogs, and in student behavior itself (which often runs counter to the assumptions of curriculum design). However, three perspectives of the community college mission emerged during the seminar deliberations: the functional, the ideational, and the constructivist.

From a functional standpoint, institutional mission is identified by examining the distribution of resources, student enrollments, and faculty among the components of the comprehensive curriculum, including remediation, career education, collegiate education, and community services. Such an examination may reveal variances between institutions (or between state community college systems) in the relative emphasis placed on the transfer function.

From an ideational view, institutional mission is determined through an assessment of the philosophies expressed concerning the role of the community college. Seminar participants agreed that these philosophies, some stressing transfer more than others, vary substantially across constituency groups, including students, faculty, and the public. Assessment of mission thus requires measurements of the perceptions of different audiences and a comparison of those perceptions with published mission statements.

From a constructivist view, institutional mission is determined through interpretations of student, faculty, and staff behavior. The nature of the college as a transfer institution is thus assessed by examining the extent to which faculty advising, teacher-student interactions in the classroom, and student course-taking patterns reflect expectations commensurate with collegiate work leading to the completion of baccalaureate degrees.

With these perspectives in mind, the seminar participants identified the following premises upon which hypotheses concerning the relationship between mission and transfer might be structured.

(1) **Community colleges may reach a "tipping point," at which the balance of functional missions may be upset by an overconcetration on one or more components (career**

education, collegiate education, remediation, etc.) to the detriment of the remaining components.

This premise leads to a number of research questions. For example, what are the political, economic, or community forces that lead a college to the "tipping point?" How can researchers identify the point in time (or the antecedents) when this is likely to occur? What is the effect of tipping to one or another function on student transfer rates? How does reaching this point affect other institutions in terms of the distribution of academic programs in a state or the compatibility or duplication of missions?

(2) **Institutional mission shifts over time, reflecting changes in the relative emphasis placed on various parts of the comprehensive community college curriculum.**

Researchers studying these shifts can examine how they come about, noting the roles played by college leaders, students, and other constituencies in changing institutional emphasis. Another approach to studying the shifting phenomenon is to examine those institutions that have undergone dramatic changes, such as two-year colleges that have become baccalaureate-granting institutions, or proprietary schools that have expanded to provide postsecondary academic programs. While the shifting phenomenon seems similar to the concept of the tipping point, the former is related to the ideational and constructivist views of mission while the latter is related to the functionalist view.

(3) **Student transfer from community colleges is a function (at least partially) of course content and expectations.**

Seminar participants noted that analyses of student course-taking patterns must be matched by studies of actual student experiences in the classroom, assessing both rigor of content and the degree to which class experiences encourage students to continue their educations. Threats to literacy in both two-year and four-year college classrooms were noted, with particular reference to the "bitting" hypothesis offered by Richardson, Fisk, and Okun (1983), who postulate that classroom teaching too often involves "the transfer of preselected bits of information without requiring analysis, synthesis, or original expression" (p. xii).

(4) **The intentions of students to transfer are related to the actual incidence of transfer.**

Seminar participants assumed a relationship between student goals and transfer, but could neither describe the dynamics of this relationship nor assess its strength. Is a preexisting intent to transfer the overriding determinant? Or is transfer more a function of the interaction between student goals and institutional mission and characteristics? If the latter, then how does the student's community college experience affect the formulation of his or her educational goals?

(5) **Student participation in nontraditional educational experiences, such as military training or formal education provided by private industry, affects student interest in transfer.**

Some seminar participants noted that the education of many community college students is not shaped solely by the two-year institution; military training, corporate education experiences, and other noncollegiate learning interacts with the community college to form the student's educational expectations. However, as in premise #4 (above), the nature of this interaction is unknown.

Institutional Organization and Transfer

The elements that shape the community college as an educational organization were also discussed as possible determinants of transfer. These include the characteristics and attitudes of the faculty and staff who interact with students and influence their decisions to stay in school, transfer, and earn a baccalaureate. Institutional policies concerning articulation, remediation, tuition, and the organization and delivery of student support services also come into play. A third category encompasses the influence of baccalaureate-granting institutions on community colleges and the educational roles they play. When considering the relationship between institutional organization and transfer, several premises were identified.

(6) **Through the organization and delivery of instruction, faculty influence student decisions to continue their education.**

It is logical to assume that the community college influences students most through its faculty—the individuals who have the most significant day-to-day contact with students. Seminar participants noted that future studies should observe student interactions with faculty, noting how the latter are influential as advisors and motivators.

(7) **Student retention at the community college and student attainment of the associate's degree may be related to student transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions.**

As in the intentions premise (#4, above), seminar participants could not specify the nature of this relationship nor suggest when, in the course of their studies, community college students should transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Much might depend on the implicit mission of the college. For example, if the "tipping point" phenomenon discussed above (premise #1) leads to an overemphasis on community education at the expense of collegiate education and other functions, student services aimed at increasing student retention within the community college could reduce student interest in transfer.

(8) **The return on institutional and state investments in articulation agreements has yet to be determined.**

Seminar participants noted the emphasis that policy makers have placed on interinstitutional articulation agreements, but they questioned their impact on transfer opportunities for community college students. For example, it was noted that articulation agreements often are negotiated at the institutional level, covering lower-division general education requirements without structuring curricular paths within individual majors. More research is needed to determine where articulation agreements have been helpful in facilitating transfer and where they have not been helpful.

(9) **Tuition increases and enrollment caps will divert students from four-year institutions to community colleges, thus reinforcing the community college emphasis on collegiate education and increasing subsequent transfer rates.**

It was noted that community colleges do not operate in isolation and that their mission is shaped at least partially by the ebb and flow of enrollments at baccalaureate-granting institutions. While there is considerable anecdotal

evidence suggesting that current financial exigencies have led to a diversion of students from four-year to two-year colleges, empirical evidence confirming this diversion and an examining the factors that cause individual students to make this diversion is needed.

(10) **Demand for transfer students at four-year colleges and universities varies by program.**

Seminar participants noted that internal enrollment and attrition patterns at baccalaureate-granting institutions will affect the opportunities community college students have to transfer into the university programs of their choice. These program-by-program variances have yet to receive serious research attention.

(11) **The quality of advising received by community college students is related to student transfer behavior.**

Some seminar participants expressed concern that community college efforts to advise students are usually aimed only at those individuals who express an interest in and seek information on transfer. It was suggested that policies requiring all students to receive information on transfer will lead to higher transfer rates. It was also suggested that advising is more effective if it is carried out by faculty rather than counselors and if its intent is to raise students' educational aspirations rather than simply to provide information on transfer requirements.

Access and Transfer

The overarching issue concerning access and transfer is the fear that emphasis on strengthening the latter decreases the former. It was conceded that open access and transfer are not mutually exclusive goals. But some seminar participants expressed concern that efforts to increase transfer through the implementation of stronger matriculation policies, such as enforced testing and placement procedures, might intimidate prospective students who would otherwise take advantage of open admissions policies. In other words, there may be a tradeoff between access and the collegiate character of the institution.

Despite this general concern, however, no distinct premises regarding access emerged during the course of the seminar. The participants recognized that discussions of access are clouded by varying definitions of the term. Some emphasize descriptive criteria, such as the proportion of total enrollment made up of underrepresented students, particularly minorities and individuals from low-income backgrounds, or the degree to which the characteristics of enrolled students mirror the characteristics of the population of the college's service district. Other definitions emphasize outcomes, such as the proportion of minority students who transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. The seminar discussions on this issue did not provide the definitional framework required for more precise research hypotheses.

Conclusion

Once these premises had been outlined, it was apparent that some are more amenable to research than others. For example, the concept of a "tipping point," mentioned in premise #1, is more abstract than the student participation in military training and other nontraditional learning experiences mentioned in premise #5. The latter can be observed and traced on transcripts and other documents, while the former is less easily discerned. These differences need to be acknowledged and factored into any plans for future research.

Nonetheless, the seminar discussions reinforced the fact that student decisions to transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate-granting institution are the products of many interacting variables. Articulation policies and student goals play a role. But these variables themselves are mediated by such factors as institutional culture and mission, the instruction and advising received by students, and the matriculation policies that govern student admission to and progression through the curriculum. This complex picture can be illuminated by researchers who examine the relationship between transfer and the broad range of institutional activities and values that affect student aspirations and behavior.

In their identification of future research directions, the seminar participants also considered sources of data, new models for research on transfer, and other relationships between policy and research. It was noted, for example, that the longitudinal survey program of the National Center for Education Statistics—the Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey and the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study—would be providing the kind of data on students in two-year institutions that will permit an examination of transfer rates for all community college students, not just those who enroll immediately after high school. Previous longitudinal study programs were more limited.

The participating researchers identified a need for qualitative research approaches in the study of the transfer function, for example, in-depth case studies at individual colleges that would lead to further hypotheses on a larger scale. Finally, the participants agreed that it would be difficult to eliminate the relationship that often exists between policy questions and research on the transfer function of community colleges. However, the need for good research from all perspectives—policy, analytic, and descriptive—was affirmed by those attending the seminar.

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